



# FIDDLE

## Improvising from the Beginning Jazz String Curriculum for String Orchestra

### Part 12: Harmonic Progression

by Cristina Seaborn

*Learn how to improvise from the ground up, and build a strong foundation of rhythm, melody, harmony and form. In a series of articles on basic instruction you can give to your 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade beginning orchestra students, we will be learning how to play accompaniment parts while half the group practices improvisation all at once. This will be a safe place for you and your students to experiment for the first time with spontaneous composition. You will be able to model this for your students, one step at a time. This table of contents lists the series of lesson plans that will come out, one topic in each String Notes magazine article:*

- Sound and Silence
- Melody and Chord Progression
- Long and Short Melodies
- Rhythm
- Groove
- Ornamentation of Melody and Rhythm
- Melody Notes Outside of the Chord
- Preparing for Harmonic Change
- Chord Tones
- Guide Tone Lines
- Ornamentation of Guide Tone Lines
- Harmonic Progression

Knowing the chord progression to a song is just as important as knowing the melody in improvisation. The interesting part of improvising is that you don't play either the melody or chord progression for your solo. You use the melody and chords for the backbone of your solo. Eventually, you will be able to do this unconsciously, but at first you do need to practice the melody and chord arpeggios. Your fingers and ears need to know, feel, and hear the melody and chords so well that it becomes part of your subconscious musical mind.

Chord arpeggios are so fun when you're playing them within a piece of music. Once you know your chord arpeggios, you will notice them throughout all the great melodies you play. You will be able to figure out the chord progression to the melodies you read and hear. Knowing the music horizontally and vertically, or knowing the melody as well as its chord progression, makes it a richer experience to be a musician.

A chord is generally made up of every other note in a scale. The simplest chords are basic triads, consisting of the scale degrees 1 3 5. For example, an A minor triad has the notes A C E. A major is made up of A C# E. To continue with the "every other note rule," you can build a 7<sup>th</sup> chord with scale degrees 1 3 5 7 (Am7 is A C E G, Amaj7 is A C# E G#).

There are many qualities of 7<sup>th</sup> chords, and here is where the arpeggio study begins:

- Major 7<sup>th</sup> — 1, 3, 5, 7
- Dominant 7<sup>th</sup> — 1, 3, 5, b7
- Dominant 7<sup>th</sup> sus 4 — 1, 4, 5, b7
- Dominant 7<sup>th</sup> sus 4 b9 — 1, 4, 5, b7, b9
- Minor 7<sup>th</sup> — 1, b3, 5, b7
- Minor/Major 7<sup>th</sup> — 1, b3, 5, 7
- Minor 6<sup>th</sup> — 1, b3, 5, 6
- Half Diminished 7<sup>th</sup> — 1, b3, b5, b7
- Full Diminished 7<sup>th</sup> — 1, b3, b5, bb7
- Augmented/Major 7<sup>th</sup> — 1, 3, +5, 7

Practice all your major scales first since these are the easiest to grasp. Once you are comfortable with major scales, you can easily practice your modes by starting and ending a major scale on different scale degrees.

Start and end on the second degree of the scale to play the Dorian scale, third degree of the scale to play Phrygian, fourth degree—Lydian, fifth degree—Mixolydian, sixth degree—Aeolian, seventh degree—Locrian. (See examples of modal scales.)

For more on the modes, go to the 4-part YouTube videos of Leonard Bernstein: Young People's Concerts | What is a Mode?

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGTT\\_VK2kVY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UGTT_VK2kVY)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWtUCAYV3so>

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5dWEPXF\\_ZU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k5dWEPXF_ZU)

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_UHUD-kZeCgU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_UHUD-kZeCgU)

By practicing your modes, you will have practiced two types of minor scales (Dorian and Aeolian, or natural minor). As you advance, you will also want to incorporate harmonic and melodic minor scales into your practice routine.

Practice using Scale Practice Plan 1 on the next page. Additional examples of scales can be downloaded from: [bit.ly/2gyvw](http://bit.ly/2gyvw)

Practice using Chord Practice Plan 2 as follows: first, choose two different chords and design the quality of the chords such as:

- G7 and Dmaj7
- Cmaj7 and Dm7
- Gm7 and D7

1. Without a specific duration of time, become familiar with the notes and sounds of each chord in order to be able to improvise over these two chords. For five minutes practice the notes from one chord in a two to three octave range.
2. Play each chord for 2 measures. Improvise using the chord tones only. Repeat 2-chord progression for 10-15 minutes using a metronome with a strong beat 1.
3. Play each chord for 1 measure. Improvise using the chord tones only. Improvise the 2-chord progression for 10-15 minutes, with a guitarist or pianist playing chords.
4. Start and end on a different pitch each time.

5. Improvise on the chord progression for an entire jazz standard, pop song, folk, or fiddle tune.

For practicing chord progressions, you can buy an app called *iReal Pro—Music Book & Play Along* by Technimo LLC for \$12.99. This gives you background recordings of standard jazz tunes, blues progressions, and many different styles of music. My friend says, “All the jazz pros use this to practice.” Also, the Jamey Abersold series does a wonderful job with the same purpose.

Choose two modes such as: A Dorian and G Ionian and repeat steps 1-5 above.

Create an improvisation using eighth notes starting on the offbeat of the measure, 2 measures per chord. e.g.:

Depending on your ear and the type of music you've been exposed to, your improvisation will draw on the rich musical library you have in your musical mind. You have to trust yourself and take a chance on improvisation. At first you won't like most of what you play, but it actually is better than you think. Even if you think you've made a mistake, often the audience doesn't know. That is the beauty of improvisation. Half the time, the listener isn't going to notice a mistake. You're always a half step away from the right note. Have the confidence to own your mistake. If you play a wrong note, be confident in playing it as a dissonance. You can learn to play with dissonance too. Music is made of dissonance and consonance. I have grown to like all the modes, extensions, and chord alterations that can be considered dissonant, so I don't think of them as wrong notes.

Simply make the improvised solo in context with the style of music you're playing, and have fun with it! Trust your inner musical voice, and the vast musical experience you already have to draw from.

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## Scale Practice Plan 1

1. Practice at slow, medium, and fast tempos.
2. Use swing 8th notes and even 8th notes.

3. Use triplets.

4. Play going up and down the scales.

5. Play going down and up the scales.

6. Start on a different degree of the scale (12345678, 23456782, 34567812 etc.) to learn the modes.

7. Start the scale on the downbeat.
8. Start the scale on the offbeat.
9. Use a variety of articulations.
10. Play the entire range of your string instrument in one position for the scale.
11. Practice the same two scales for several days before switching to two new scales.
12. Practice a modal scale pattern in 6 keys one day, the other 6 keys the next day.